

# Ten Years of Transparency: The role of performance reporting at WSDOT

Overview and lessons learned: 2001-2011

Agency-wide performance reporting is a high priority at WSDOT. Data tracking, measurement, and reporting methods are continuously refined. The reporting approach is dynamic to adapt to changing public and legislative expectations, agency needs, and to provide timely performance information.

In May 2011, the *Gray Notebook* (GNB), once known as *Measures, Markers and Mileposts* and nicknamed for its gray cover, celebrated its tenth year of publication with its 41st edition. This quarterly publication forms the foundation for agency performance assessment and reporting, as well as public and legislative communication.

*The Gray Notebook* provides readable, in-depth reports on agency and transportation system performance. The purpose of *The Gray Notebook* is to keep WSDOT accountable to the Governor, Washington's citizens, legislators, and transportation organizations.

The development of the GNB has influenced many related accountability and performance products. It supports multiple performance measurement and reporting initiatives and requirements. It is also an important internal management and integration tool. The rigor and quality control involved in developing each performance report requires a hands-on approach by staff and managers at all levels and across all programs.



*The first, nine-page Gray Notebook (left) published in May 14, 2001, next to the 10th anniversary edition, published May 25, 2011.*

As WSDOT celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Gray Notebook in 2011, **Paula Hammond**, Washington Secretary of Transportation, observed

*"As budgets get tighter, performance management and reporting is more important than ever. The Gray Notebook is one of our best tools for demonstrating that taxpayer dollars are being used for projects that provide real benefits. Our ability to make transportation investments in the future relies on our continued credible, transparent and accountable reporting."*



*Reporting transportation system performance against policy goals of safety, preservation, mobility, environment, economic vitality, and stewardship.*

## A short overview of WSDOT's experience in performance reporting

Data collection and analysis began with a series of legislative mandates in 1990 and transitioned into performance measurement over the course of the decade. When Secretary Doug MacDonald took office in 2001, he implemented a comprehensive performance and accountability paradigm for WSDOT that involved frequent and accurate reporting of system and agency performance to support transparency and accountability.

Since 2007, Secretary Paula Hammond has renewed WSDOT's commitment to "no surprises" reporting. Under her leadership, the GNB has expanded and continued to build on WSDOT's legacy of accurate data collection and systems analysis. Performance measures focus on multi-modal system performance and include organizational performance reports for select topics such as project delivery and worker safety. Annually, WSDOT uses well over 100 specific performance measures in its accountability reporting that encompass all key agency mandates, functions, and transportation modes

## How WSDOT reports results through "Performance Journalism"

WSDOT uses a style of reporting called "Performance Journalism," created by the agency and discussed in more detail on page 4. Performance Journalism\* combines effective narrative writing with visual graphs and tables in order to provide a clear and accurate assessment to the widest possible audience. The analysis is compiled into the GNB, which is published quarterly in February, May, August, and November every year.

WSDOT makes extensive use of its website for performance reporting, and the GNB is distributed in hard copy and electronically to a broad audience of 2,000+ subscribers. Each edition is archived online: an electronic subject index allows access to every performance measure ever published. Each edition is accompanied by a press release to the media, and is distributed to all legislators, the Governor, the Transportation Commission, interest groups, cities and counties, universities and research organizations nationwide, state and national transportation planning partners, AASHTO members, and international colleagues.

## Benefits of consistent performance reporting

The largest impact of measuring and reporting performance results has been the increased confidence of the Governor, Legislature and the public in the projects and programs managed by WSDOT. When Secretary MacDonald took office, the agency lacked public confidence and credibility and faced criticism for its lack of transparency. Within a short time of three to six months, this started to change. The first publication of the *Gray Notebook* (May 2001) resulted in positive media attention and by the second edition in July, the press and leadership applauded the agency's efforts (see sample press clippings in the gray panel at right).

Ten years later, the feedback continues to be positive. The analysis of performance measures follows a "no surprises" philosophy for WSDOT's heads-up style of early and timely reporting of performance. Performance is reported – good or bad, no exceptions.

\* *Bridging the Gap Between Agencies and Citizens: Performance Journalism Offers A Practical Solution to Communicate Performance Results.* (Bremmer and Bryan, TRB Paper 08-1736)

## Press clippings through the years

"These reports are among the best I've seen in Washington state government for using performance measurement data to tell the agency's story." **The Washington State Office of Financial Management, July 2001**

"WSDOT's Gray Notebook is second to none in the country for reporting performance measures." **Christine Johnson, FHWA Director of Field Services, November 2002**

"... The Gray Notebook is one of the nation's leading examples of effective statewide performance monitoring. WSDOT continually improves The Gray Notebook to better communicate how it is addressing state transportation issues." **FHWA, "Traffic Congestion and Reliability: Trends and Advanced Strategies for Congestion Mitigation," September, 2005**

"What sets these reports apart in content and intended audience are their ability to bridge the gap between the technical and promotional, between the professionally knowledgeable and the average public. In this manner, the Gray Notebook represents a hybrid of the in-depth technical and the easier-to-grasp summary report." **Making the Case for Transportation Investment, and Revenue, AASHTO October 2009**

"The GNB evolves over time to account for new challenges or priorities. For example, WSDOT incorporated stimulus tracking into the GNB, going above federal requirements for accountability. ... Besides improving content, WSDOT has also made the GNB even more user-friendly over the years." **Highways and Climate Change: Transportation Planning and Sustainability Guidebook, FHWA, January 2011**

"Our state seems to be a rarity when it comes to transparency in government, at least as far as WSDOT is concerned. 'Only three other states come to mind — Missouri, Michigan and Tennessee — as examples of states with as much public disclosure,' said Tony Dorsey [of] the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials in Washington, D. C." **Seattle Daily Journal of Commerce, June 2011**

The frank and consistent performance reporting in the *Gray Notebook* was instrumental in supporting two legislative transportation revenue packages (2003 and 2005), funding a total of \$16 billion in projects – the largest capital delivery program in the state's history. Further, a statewide initiative to repeal the 2005 gas tax increase was defeated by Washington voters, a public vote of confidence in the department's ability to deliver results and communicate effectively using performance measures.†

When the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (2009, also known as the federal stimulus) called for stringent federal- and state-level reporting, the *Gray Notebook* and other reporting experience gave the agency a strong foundation, drawing on established relationships and processes, as well as a reputation for credibility, candor, and transparency already established.

Internally, the performance measures have become a core management tool and cultural philosophy at WSDOT – the motto used often is, "What gets measured gets managed."

† *Making the Case for Funding: The WSDOT Experience* (Bremmer and Bryan, TRB Paper 08-1967)

# Transportation policy goals form the basis of performance reporting in the Gray Notebook...

The Gray Notebook is the basis for WSDOT performance reporting that links performance measures for the strategic plan, legislative, and executive policy directions, as well as federal reporting requirements.

## What are the state's policy goals, and how are they used in performance reporting?

In 2007, the Governor and Legislature enacted a law establishing five policy goals for transportation agencies in Washington State (Chapter 516, Laws of 2007). The five statewide transportation policy goals initially developed include:

- **Safety:** To provide for and improve the safety and security of transportation customers and the transportation system;
- **Preservation:** To maintain, preserve, and extend the life and utility of prior investments in transportation systems and services;
- **Mobility (Congestion Relief):** To improve the predictable movement of goods and people throughout Washington;
- **Environment:** To enhance Washington's quality of life through transportation investments that promote energy conservation, enhance healthy communities, and protect the environment;
- **Stewardship:** To continuously improve the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of the transportation system.

In March 2010, the Governor and Legislature added a new policy goal for transportation: **Economic Vitality**. It directs WSDOT to "promote and develop transportation systems that stimulate, support, and enhance the movement of people and goods to ensure a prosperous economy." WSDOT is developing the necessary business direction plans through the agency's strategic planning process.

With the 30th edition (June 30, 2008), the *Gray Notebook* was reorganized into sections devoted to those strategic goals. Contents include quarterly and annual reports on key agency functions, providing regularly updated system and program performance information. Annual system performance updates are rotated over four quarters based on data availability and relevant data cycles, to provide in-depth analysis of topics such as capital facilities, aviation, freight, and a post-winter report on highway maintenance. Quarterly topics, such as worker safety, incident response, Amtrak *Cascades*, and Washington State Ferries, are featured in each edition since data is available more frequently.

Matters pertaining to WSDOT's Federal Recovery Act-funded projects, including high speed rail and TIGER grant projects, finance, capital project delivery, workforce, and agency highlights appear in the Stewardship section. The Beige Pages address the delivery of the projects funded in the 2003 Transportation Funding Package (Nickel), 2005 Transportation Funding Package (TPA), and Pre-Existing Funds (PEF).

## Safety

WSDOT's role in the design and execution of projects designed to reduce or mitigate serious accidents for motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians is critical. Articles highlight Before & After research of new safety projects, retrofits, and new design strategies. WSDOT also addresses its efforts to reduce on-the-job accidents and injuries for its workforce.

## Preservation

What is WSDOT doing to preserve the existing infrastructure? What are the conditions of state roads, bridges, and ferries? The Preservation section contains articles dealing with asset management issues at WSDOT. Performance measures include the overall condition of state facilities, the number of repairs and replacements that have occurred, and identifying the short- and long-term trends that affect future preservation efforts.

## Mobility

What is WSDOT doing to ensure reliable and efficient travel on state highways, ferries, and rail operations? How efficient is the transportation system at moving goods and people? The mobility covers in detail the many modes of transportation that WSDOT supports to get people to their destinations in a reliable and efficient manner, with a specific focus on how congestion affects reliability of the system and how it can be mitigated.

## Environment

How does transportation affect the local environment? What are WSDOT's obligations to minimize its impact on natural resources and species? How is the environment integrated into the work that WSDOT does? Environmental reporting focuses on these responsibilities and reports back on the progress and challenges of balancing transportation and environmental needs.

## Stewardship

Stewardship focuses on WSDOT's commitment to remain accountable for the Legislative funding it has received to construct highway, rail, freight, aviation, and ferry system projects. The schedule and budget results for these projects, printed on beige paper to distinguish them from other *Gray Notebook* reporting, are tracked through their development, advertisement, construction, and completion processes. This section of the *Gray Notebook* also reports on stimulus-funded projects, research, and cross-cutting management issues.

## Economic Vitality

The newest policy goal addresses the ways in which the transportation system can stimulate and enhance the economic development of Washington, leading to a more prosperous economy overall.



# ...And the Gray Notebook supports WSDOT's accountability to multiple audiences



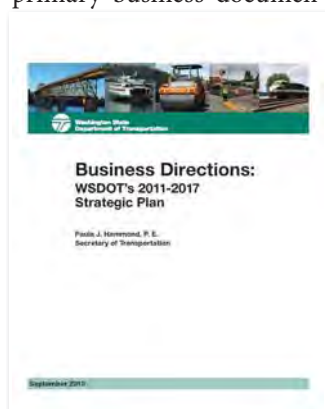
**Attainment Report (OFM)**  
The Washington State Office of Financial Management (OFM) is responsible for setting objectives and establishing performance measures for each of the goals. OFM must report on the attainment of the goals and objectives to the Governor and Legislature each biennium. In January, 2008, OFM published a "baseline"

report to get feedback from the Governor and Legislature on draft objectives and performance measures.

The most recent Attainment Report, for 2010, is available online at [www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/PerformanceReporting/Attainment.htm](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/PerformanceReporting/Attainment.htm), or on OFM's performance and results website: [www.ofm.wa.gov/performance](http://www.ofm.wa.gov/performance)

## Strategic Plan (WSDOT)

The Strategic Plan is WSDOT's primary business document provided to OFM, the Legislature, and the Governor, and provides a six year outlook on the financial obligations and priorities of WSDOT. The Strategic Plan makes use of performance measures already found in the OFM Attainment Report, POG, and GMAP. The Strategic Plan has specific, measurable objectives for each of the six transportation policy goals. The document is updated every two years to be reflective of past performance, and the direction that WSDOT will take in the next six years.



## Priorities of Government (OFM)

POG is an investment prioritization process used to help the Governor and Legislature develop agency budgets. Every biennium, workgroups composed of government agency and private sector representatives identify results that citizens expect from government, and evaluate the performance of state agency activities and services against those expected results. Information about the 20011-13 POG process is available at: [www.ofm.wa.gov/budget/pog](http://www.ofm.wa.gov/budget/pog).



## WSDOT Accountability website

The WSDOT Accountability website includes an extensive arrangement of performance information, including a performance measure index, GNB Archive, Performance Audits, and updates for the Attainment Report, GMAP, and the Strategic Plan.



WSDOT's Project Delivery website provides timely information on the delivery of projects profiled in each edition of the *Gray Notebook*.

Projects in the construction phase have Quarterly Project Reports that provides an updated on the project's completion timeline, cost performance, and any concerns related to the completion of the project.

## Government Management Accountability and Performance program (GMAP)

The GMAP program is the Governor's initiative to help agencies create dialogues for discussing performance and improving policy decisions. GMAP is conducted in forums, both internally and externally in publically held forums with the Governor and their staff. GMAP forums include key performance indicators that are important to both the Governor and the given agency. GMAP measures overlap with the POG and Attainment Report measures.



## Gray Notebook Lite and dashboard (WSDOT)

Every quarter, the *Gray Notebook* publishes the *Gray Notebook Lite* and a performance dashboard. The *Gray Notebook Lite* is a folio with highlights of the annual performance reporting found in the corresponding edition of the full *Gray Notebook*.



The high-clip dashboard, contained in each GNB edition, presents only the primary performance measures for policy goals found in the Attainment Report, POG, and GMAP.

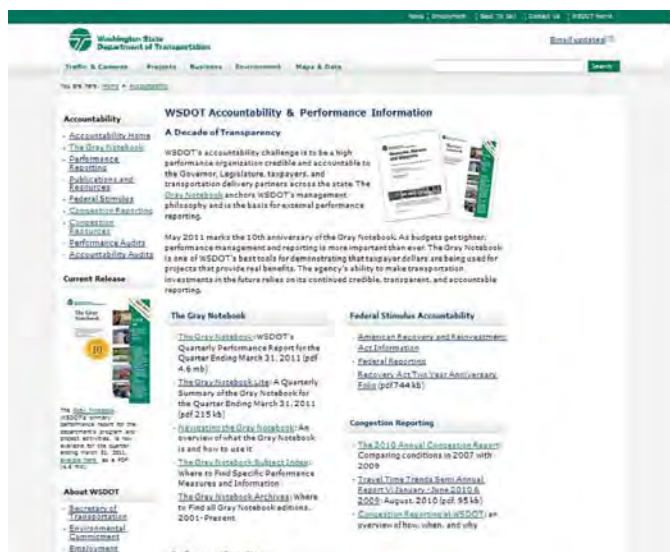
## Best practice research

As they have since the first edition of the *Gray Notebook*, WSDOT staff continually review the performance reports of other state DOTs and private and public sector industry, as well as national and international research, to gain new insights and adopt best practices. Staying current on national and international developments, conducting its own research, continuously learning from others, and adapting good ideas are key elements in WSDOT's work. Frequent communications with international colleagues include the UK, VicRoads in Australia, and the Japanese Ministry of Transportation.

For initial graphing guidance, WSDOT drew on the work of Edward Tufte, a Yale University professor whose research and publications on graphics have been widely adopted in business and government. His insights have proved to be valuable in delivering clear graphical interpretations of performance data at WSDOT, but the agency also innovates, looking for new ways to visualize data that helps readers understand complex data sets quickly and interpret them correctly.

*"... While The Gray Notebook is intended to communicate information to external audiences, perhaps one of its greatest strengths is how the preparation process stimulates internal discussions about performance. Precisely because a variety of management staff are engaged in producing The Gray Notebook, discussion about performance becomes part of the management process and not just a mechanical step of producing a report." State of Washington Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, Performance Audit Results: "Review of Accountability Mechanisms for Washington State Department of Transportation," August, 2005*

WSDOT also created a web-based Performance Measurement Library that provides agency and external colleagues access to performance reports by other state DOTs, relevant and updated national and international reports, and research on performance topics. For more information, visit [www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/Publications/PerformanceDocuments](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/Publications/PerformanceDocuments)



WSDOT's Accountability and Performance Reporting website

## Lessons learned

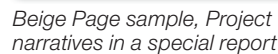
- Measures will invariably change. They are and need to be dynamic to respond to changing political or fiscal environments. Performance measurement is an iterative process. Don't be afraid to try something new.
- Don't reinvent the wheel and stay current on national and international developments. Continuously learning from others and adapting good ideas are key elements in WSDOT's work.
- Don't measure for measures sake. Performance measurement is one of several decision-making tools available to management and policy makers. A means but not the end.
- Challenges include:
  - being able to analyze and understand what is happening on the system and finding ways to describe it
  - understanding what really matters to the public and policy-makers and finding ways to measure and communicate it
  - demonstrating the effects of agency programs and what they provide for taxpayers' money now
  - making an effective case for continued funding
  - providing the most timely performance information possible - at least for key areas. Timing is everything.
- Start small but report now - don't delay until you have the perfect data, the right measurement framework or a sophisticated IT system. WSDOT's 100 page GNB is published every quarter and is not automated. Pick a topic and start now.
- Create a sense of urgency and a real-time response culture.
- Lead –don't follow. Use narrative reporting to tell your story before someone else tells it for you.
- Make communicating relevant and easy-to-understand measures, text, and graphs your number one priority not an afterthought once the data is collected.
- Hold regular problem-solving sessions with key management.
- Don't tolerate silos. Everyone owns everyone's performance. Strive for a "One DOT" mentality.
- Quality control of data and writing needs to become a religion. Apply strict standards of quality control involving all levels of management. Your data and analysis is your credibility.
- Drive for performance-based resource allocation for strategies that work.
- Never miss an opportunity to report to the Governor, the Legislature, the media, the public and other key partners on performance. Keep material and reports up-to-date and ready to go.
- Recruiting and retaining staff with the ability to develop good performance reports is a challenge. Intuition for data, analysis, and writing skills is one of the most in demand skill sets. The job is demanding and high profile and staff is often recruited away.
- Executive management support and hands-on involvement is paramount. Mid-level management might be sceptical but can be convinced once they see results.
- Think of yourself as an investigative reporter. Dig in, keep asking questions and understand the whys and hows of all agency operations and functions reported on.
- Show passion and enthusiasm. Have fun and find balance – it is a stressful job, but it is also one of the most rapidly developing and in-demand professional fields.



The GNB presents articles in a way that makes the topics' relationship to the six Legislative policy goals – and WSDOT's own strategic business directions – more clear.

Matters pertaining to WSDOT's Federal Recovery Act-funded projects, including high speed rail and TIGER grant projects, finance, capital project delivery, workforce, and agency highlights appear in the Stewardship section. The Beige Pages address the delivery of the projects funded in the 2003 Transportation Funding Package (Nickel), 2005 Transportation Funding Package (TPA), and Pre-Existing Funds (PEF).

By aligning the *Gray Notebook*'s articles with WSDOT's business goals as outlined in the agency's strategic plan, *Business Directions*, WSDOT tries to make tracking performance results against specific strategic actions more simple.



*The Gray Notebook* uses a special style of reporting called “Performance Journalism.” Performance Journalism\* is the combination of quantitative reporting using charts, tables, and measurements, and narrative storytelling. The goal is to share the performance of WSDOT’s most complex and diverse programs and projects clearly and concisely in a format that everyone can easily understand and explain to their neighbors. A collaborative effort between the production staff, data analysts, and program experts across the agency is essential.

- Good stories combined with good graphics:** Use narrative reporting to make it real and tell the story: sounds simple, but can be a difficult task.
- Good writing:** Use a reader-friendly approach.
- Good data and rigorous systems analysis:** Unyielding pursuit for data integrity and quality analysis.
- Good graphics and visualization:** Every graph tells a story, every graph asks a question.
- Good format/presentation:** Content-driven design: entice the reader to engage with the material, quickly grasp the message, not distract from content.
- Quality control:** It's your credibility.
- Good timing:** Lead, don't follow; provide frequent and timely information.

The *Gray Notebook* can be easily accessed online at WSDOT's Accountability website, [www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability). The quarterly editions are archived by year, edition and subject.

The **electronic subject index** gives readers access to current and archived performance information. This comprehensive index is easy to use and instantly links to every performance measure published to date. Measures are organized alphabetically within program areas. A click on the subject topic and edition number provides a direct link to that page. A copy of the subject index is also provided in the back of each edition.

*Daniela Bremmer*  
*WSDOT Strategic Assessment Office*  
*310 Maple Park Avenue SE*  
*P.O. Box 47374*  
*Olympia, WA 98504-7374*  
*Phone: 360-705-7953*  
*E-mail: [bremmed@wsdot.wa.gov](mailto:bremmed@wsdot.wa.gov)*

Ten Years of Transparency | page 4